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A Sublime Inheritance?: A Review Essay of Anshu Malhotra and Farina Mir's Punjab Reconsidered

Anshu Malhotra and Farina Mir, eds., *Punjab Reconsidered: History, Culture, and Practice*, Oxford University Press, 2012, 496 pp., \$65.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9780198078012.

In their edited volume, *Punjab Reconsidered: History, Culture, and Practice*, Anshu Malhotra and Farina Mir bring together a diverse array of articles that examine the varied cultures and peoples of Punjab and its diaspora, both historically and in the present. Malhotra and Mir bind these disparate essays together by appealing to the concept of *Punjabiyat*, which they define loosely as “a sentiment of belonging or attachment to Punjab and/or the foundations of a shared, cross-religious, cross-caste, cross-class culture” that conceptually differentiate Punjab as a region historically, spatially, and culturally (xv). In what follows, I will not provide a detailed summary of all the chapters that complicate and build upon this ethereal “imaginary” malleable through time and space. Instead, I will examine the conceptual work *Punjabiyat* does as an analytic category and the political logic that the editors claim to recover by invoking it.

Malhotra and Mir draw upon *Punjabiyat* in order to rethink exclusive forms of identity (Sikh, Hindu, Muslim) that, they argue, dominate the historiography of Punjab and elide a past inclusive Punjabi identity. This Punjabi identity, which they argue has precariously continued into the present, emerges as more than an analytic tool for scholars to understand the shared discursive terrain of the Islamic, Sikh, and Hindu traditions; rather what appears is a political opportunity. Though Malhotra and Mir caution against positing an oppositional relationship between *Punjabiyat* and communalism, they still gesture towards “the potential of *Punjabiyat* to act as an antidote to the politics of antagonism” (lii). In other words, *Punjabiyat* functions as an antidote to colonial and reified formulations of tradition that led to unspeakably violent events based on exclusive forms of identity, such as partition, by focusing our attention upon the “multiple inheritances” of the Punjab which can then guide us toward a possible emancipatory future (xlii).

The chapters chart and historicize these inheritances within the Punjab. For example, Anshu Malhotra, in her examination of Piro, a woman follower of the Gulabdasī sect, depicts “the gradual sedimentation of varied influences and traditions layering the making of the Gulabdasī sect” that emerged because of their openness to “parallel theological

concepts that permeated the Punjabi landscape” (215). Such openness created “alternative pluralistic spaces” that, in the case of the Gulabdasi sect, led to “adherents from all communities [Hindus and Muslims] and castes, which subverted the demand of narrow identities made by religious authorities by expanding the “horizons of religious, spiritual and social life” (214-215). Thus, Punjab emerges in Malhotra’s analysis as a fluid and open-ended, what she labels “syncretic,” cultural and emotional landscape in which people had an aversion toward “dogmatic and capricious power” (207). Malhotra’s rendering of the Punjabi landscape then challenges the forms of identity centered on an entrenched religious divide fixed within a static social that are imprinted on the Punjabi landscape today. For Malhotra and Mir, such narratives that reveal the fluid historical content of Punjab become valuable for this very reason. By methodically investigating what lies behind the often reified form of Punjabi traditions, a process that reveals the hidden pluralist content of the Punjab, *Punjabiyat* can “scupper and subvert the given ritual and social hierarchies of Punjabi society” (xlivi).

In what is now largely axiomatic, we know there is no overarching order that intersects across the historical record whether it is the concept of man, private property, or *Punjabiyat*. That is, as Michel Foucault writes, an “object does not await in limbo the order that will free it and enable it to become embodied in a visible and prolix objectivity.”¹ Following this injunction, the editors do not pinpoint *Punjabiyat* as a trans-historical object or as an overarching frame. Rather, the volume continuously qualifies and tempers *Punjabiyat*, questioning its historicity and suggesting its complicated genealogy within colonial constructions of knowledge. For example, Malhotra and Mir write, “we are acutely aware that *Punjabiyat* and the articulation of oppositional or conflictual religious identities are implicated in the same historical processes” (lii). Yet, *Punjabiyat* is not simply the articulation of a new derivative nationalist identity; rather, as Alyssa Ayres argues, the features of *Punjabiyat* “differ markedly from those we have to understand as classical nationalism” even though “we need to recognize that the production and reproduction of a particular cultural space, via oral poetic forms...illustrate the conceptual importance of symbolic value of a language-culture complex” that seeks to a carve a space for its inclusion (36, 56). *Punjabiyat* thereby refuses neat categorizations and does not function as an all-encompassing structure, a metanarrative, that frames the content; instead it is a continuous pouring of the historical record, “repressed” excess content, into the ossified frame of present day Punjab ostensibly making our understanding of the region and its people richer, deeper, and plural.

Farina Mir’s chapter for the volume, “Genre and Devotion in Punjabi Popular Narratives,” exemplifies this type of analysis. She argues that the Punjabi *qisse* tradition was consistent in its “representation of piety” and it “accommodated all Punjabis, irrespective of differences of region, class or caste” in contrast to the increasingly communal discourse that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. So although Islamic idioms, such as *haram*, might appear in the texts, it was only “the language employed for a discourse on piety that was not, at the levels of either production or consumption limited to Muslims alone” (252). Nevertheless, Mir does not deny the efficacy of Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam as analytical categories in favor of *Punjabiyat*. Rather, her refined argument suggests that the practice of saint veneration, represented in *qisse*, exists as an “independent set of beliefs that are neither in conflict with nor coterminous with Punjab’s major religious traditions” (253). Thus, Mir does not excavate the historical record for a singular object/frame (*Punjabiyat*) that

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 45.

structures our understanding of Punjab; rather, *Punjabiyat* is a fragment in a plural social world that is repressed in, and therefore negates, formulations of the Punjab today centered on notions of whole singular traditions. The key is to become aware of the invisible reified form of tradition that frames the content, the demand for singularity of tradition, which becomes possible when we recover repressed content.

This tension between repressed excess content and present-day reified form, however, is perhaps not best revealed by rejecting a transcendental framework as the volume does. Rather, it seems, the key is to take heed of Slavoj Žižek's warning that we should "avoid the properly fetishistic fascination of the 'content[s]' supposedly hidden behind the form"² since "the form remains operative even after the content is no longer repressed."³ That is, though the rigid inert form of Punjabi traditions elides past content, that very elision itself is dialectically reflected back into both the positive articulation of its content *and* its negation in the search for excess content. The key then is not to recover the pluralistic *Punjabiyat* contents hidden in the historical record of present day Punjabi traditions that reveal the true "Punjab." Rather, we need to examine the gap, or interspace, between form and content that functions as a short-circuit to another desire, which is not hidden within the content, but articulates itself in the very elaboration of the historical record. Namely, it is a desire for a whole undivided Punjab that emerges as a sign for the possible fulfillment of the post-colonial promise that masks the ontological impossibility of non-antagonism within the socio-historical formation of capitalist modernity.

Punjab, though the object cause of this desire, also retroactively constructs the Punjab as a unified political entity to cover the constitutive lack initiated by the traumatic advent of colonial rule and the literal rupture of its end. Punjab causes, and emerges from, this desire as a complete and unblemished object and is precisely the nodal point that stitches both the form of rigid identity rendered communal and its excess content, *Punjabiyat*, articulated as the plural. Though the communal renderings of tradition is futural in its content, whereas *Punjabiyat* recovers the past for this non-antagonistic world, Punjab, in both circumstances, is the veritable object at the end of history that exists as a pure space devoid of violent disagreement that endures through its impossibility. Thus, even as Malhotra and Mir consistently refer to the impossibility of *Punjabiyat*, pointing to its myriad contradictions, and even its absence, Punjab continues to persist in its sublimity "like the corpse of the Sadeian victim which endures all torments and survives with its beauty immaculate."⁴ Though Malhotra and Mir eschew Punjab's transhistoricity, Punjab still transcends the breaking apart of its material object—the partitioning of Punjab—and remains unaffected by the knowledge of its own nebulous un-reality—that it is also a colonial construct—continually sustaining the non-antagonistic history that the volume seeks to recover.

Rather than looking for an end to the politics of antagonism, it is fruitful to recall, as Adrian Johnston reminds us in his reading of Žižek, that "the field of the historical remains historical...precisely because it never arrives at a final satisfying point of closure, a moment when it achieves a harmonious state capable of enduring thereafter without change."⁵ This reading of Žižekian historicity requires that we should pause, as Yvonne Sherwood rightfully argues in another context, when certain models, like *Punjabiyat* "suggest that it is

² Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989), 11.

³ Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 305.

⁴ Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 18.

⁵ Adrian Johnston, *Žižek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 119-120.

possible fully to unbind fundamentally violent from fundamentally peaceful expressions of the same religious inheritances” wherein one offers us a harmonious point of closure and the other needs to be decisively excised, for what these models do is bracket out the ambiguity and fragility of inheritance.⁶ Yet, in her chapter in the volume, Anne Murphy precisely posits this organic macro self-integration as a resolution that expels violent forms of difference from tradition. Using *Gurbilās* literature as a lens to comment on the category of religion, she argues that difference within a social space, such as Punjab, was negotiated through an established “comparative framework within which both a Sikh position, and an Islamic one, reside” that allowed one to assert religious difference or overcome it through conversion or in devotional terms (109). These negotiations, Murphy argues, reveal to us that there exists “an underlying universal aspect of the human experience that can be understood as ‘religion’” in which difference is rendered sensible and can “be resolved in the movement of devotion, and the moment beyond” (109).

However, instead of locating a desire to reassert a universal experience discovered in the content that can resolve difference, or at least make it legible, a better approach might be to ask whether it is possible to leave tradition[s] open to unresolved, at times, violent, difference? In order to answer this question, we might need to move away from the contents of the Punjab landscape to reconsidering the very form of tradition articulated by the phantasmatic reality structured by our desire for a complete Punjab. Rethinking this form requires that we reject the static conceptualization of tradition that follows a colonial logic in which orthodoxy needs to be ruptured through recognition in consciousness to a new stage of history—its end. Whether this end is premised on pre-colonial fluidity and diversity or in an authoritative return to a singular conception of a rigid tradition—be it Sikh, Hindu, or Muslim—what emerges is a resolved account of tradition that creates an encyclopedic taxonomy that is applicable to all. In contrast, perhaps we should think about tradition, both embodied and discursive, as a site of struggle between narrator and audience for truth that is outside the temporal and organizational constraints put forth by completeness, resolution, et cetera.

My argument is that Talal Asad’s theoretical work on tradition overcomes this impasse centered on the content of tradition, between fluidity and rigidity, that structures the historiography of Punjab today. Against abstractions of neat homogeneity, Asad’s work need not reject the content put forth by *Punjabiyat*. He readily acknowledges that “medieval Christendom and Islam recognized a multiplicity of overlapping bonds and identities” and that tradition itself is not homogenous, but heterogeneous with a variety of practices and reasonings.⁷ Yet, Asad forces us to rethink the very form of tradition thereby opening the possibilities for tradition beyond resolution. He argues that although Islam is heterogeneous and plural, tradition is still constituted as a singularity, as Islam, because Muslims still aspire toward coherence by contesting practices and discourses relying upon foundational texts; i.e., Islam is a “historically extended, socially embodied, argument.”⁸ These contestations and arguments within tradition signal that “there clearly is not, nor can there be, such a thing as a universally acceptable account of a living tradition” because tradition is marked

⁶ Yvonne Sherwood, “Binding-Unbinding: Divided Responses of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the ‘Sacrifice’ of Abraham’s Beloved Son,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72, no. 4 (December 2004): 855.

⁷ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 179.

⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 222.

by conflict that can never be resolved whether in the excess content marked by diversity that *Punjabiyat* presents or its inverse, the rigid form.⁹ Inheritance then, such as the legacy of plurality and heterogeneity, becomes a rather ambiguous affair for it remains continually contested within the populace as well as constrained by political and economic conditions of the time—both of which structure the debate over orthodoxy. The historical record, therefore, our inheritance, does not provide an antidote to antagonisms or an object at the end of history, but only offers the radical impossibility of closure itself.

Yet, this desire for closure takes hold analytically, as with *Punjabiyat*, when we obscure the temporal form of tradition by representing tradition “as the inheritance of an unchanging cultural substance from the past—as though ‘past’ and ‘present’ were places in a linear path down which that object was conveyed to the ‘future.’”¹⁰ By reopening the temporal frame of tradition, I want to suggest that Asad’s work, contra the desire to quell antagonism through historical content, requires that we return antagonism to the formal structure of tradition; i.e., to recognize that tradition is constituted by the conflict between narratives, at times antagonistic, that can shift the structural principles of [im]possibility within a historical landscape while others simultaneously work within those very coordinates.¹¹ By reorienting the form of tradition temporally and placing antagonism as its central feature, Asad’s work allows us to move outside the demands for continual historical contextualization in search for resolution and instead turns our attention to a different form of experiences and practices: those of aspiration, becoming, and expectation that contest and re-define the various contours of one’s past.¹²

If we return antagonism to tradition without seeking its resolution, the ghosts that *Punjabiyat* seeks to dispel, the specter of the *Khalistani* and the *mujahideen*, return not as reified presences of the violent (male) figure guarding the orthodoxy of a static Sikh/Muslim tradition, but as perspectives of hope and social action displaced within the desire for a post-colonial future that, paradoxically, remains eminently colonial. It is precisely Asad’s form of tradition that requires us to keep open the unclarity of meaning and the radical contingency of inheritance in our analyses. Though one’s politics of comfort might flinch at such prospects, we have to recall, as Asad reminds us, that “in the process of thinking one should be open to ending up in unanticipated places—whether these produce satisfaction or desire, discomfort or horror.”¹³ By not closing these unexpected places through narratives of plurality discovered by excavating the historical content, perhaps then we can keep open the possibility, the unaccountable transgression of truth, that reaches beyond the limits of the symbolic community to which today we all belong.

⁹ Talal Asad, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” Occasional Papers Series (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), 17.

¹⁰ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 222.

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, “Class Struggle or Postmodernism?: Yes, Please!” in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, ed. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2000), 112.

¹² Chapters in the volume, however, do subvert the logic of *Punjabiyat* as espoused by Malhotra and Mir. For example, C.S. Adcock’s focus on Dharm Pal’s conversion and contestation of what constituted the Hindu tradition by rejecting the logic of caste opens the frame of tradition that cannot be reduced to the desire for *Punjabiyat* (261–286).

¹³ Talal Asad, “Reply to Judith Butler,” in *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, ed. Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood (Berkeley: The Townsend Center for the Humanities, 2009), 139.

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